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Repository Citation

Gerhart, Peter M., "Wilbur Leatherberry: Our Center of Gravity" (2012). *Faculty Publications*. 104.
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WILBUR LEATHERBERRY: OUR CENTER OF GRAVITY

Peter M. Gerhart[†]

Some lead with words; some with actions. Some lead with anger; some with authority. Some lead with attitude. Those who lead with attitude are precious few, made more precious because they are so few. Bill Leatherberry leads with attitude. He projects a quiet and reasoned confidence. He is unflappable and imperturbable. He projects calm and control, evidence of a sure faith that things will work out.

Every institution needs a gyroscope, a way of finding the center of gravity that pulls people together when they want to drift apart. Bill Leatherberry played that role; he was the Case Western Reserve School of Law gyroscope—a reasoned and reasoning voice in the midst of turmoil, and a beacon to signal that we would get through the crises of the moment. He understood extremes, but he also knew that opposite extremes, if they are to be rightfully credited, must meet in the middle. And Bill pulled us to the middle. His inner calm reflected his approach to problem solving. He knew that everything most people said contained a grain of truth, but he also knew that what people said never contained as much truth as the speaker assumed.

The strength of his intellect is being able to grasp a wide range of ideas and considerations on any topic. The strength of his character is being able to reconcile competing ideas and claims by drawing them towards the middle, a skill that his attitude toward life gave him. He understood all sides of an issue, honored them, and understood that the truth stood somewhere at the intersection of views. If Bill had to cast the deciding vote, you knew that it would be well reasoned, dependable, and centrist. When faculty meetings got heated, as they sometimes do, Bill was there to tell the faculty that all would be okay. When a student was in distress, Bill would meet him or her with an air of confidence in the future and the value of doing the right thing. Bill was patient in discussion and well balanced in debate. If he was angry or dismayed, it was impossible to tell; even his persistence, although forthright, was gentle.

That kind of attitude means a great deal to an institution. Bill taught us how to lose a vote without rancor or recriminations and how to win a vote without pride or self-importance. He taught us the value of faith in the future and persistence in the face of difficulties. He taught us that we are not as important as we think we are, nor as meaningless as others might have us believe. Steady the course was his course.

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Fortunately for us, Bill did not keep his skills to himself. He was Mr. Institutional Strength. He did everything and anything—always well. His attitude infused the classroom, his service on many faculty committees, and the many committee appointments he accepted from the university. He was the “go to” guy because of his skill and attitude, never shirking responsibility or the demands of the tasks in front of him. He was my second Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, and he served with great distinction. Sometimes deans make mistakes; sometimes people think that deans make mistakes. The associate dean is generally the shock absorber in such incidents, absorbing the anger of the disgruntled and translating their views to the triumphant. For the disgruntled, he had to explain why the dean did what he did. For the dean, he had to explain why the dean should not have done what he did. He always did so with unfailing courtesy, understanding, and sympathy. He was loyal always to the institution and its best interests.

As Associate Dean, Bill counseled students and consoled the faculty. He did the detail work that is required to get the schedule right, was successful at getting faculty to do what they might otherwise not want to do, and did as much as he could to accommodate the sometimes-conflicting needs of faculty and students. As a counselor of students, his attitude conveyed intense interest in their well-being and understanding of their circumstances. He was able to deny requests that needed to be denied, but no student left his office feeling that he or she had not been treated well and thoughtfully.

Bill was also a terrific ambassador to the Cleveland bar, in touch with decades of our students and active in bar association functions. He taught continuing legal education courses, participated in the study of dispute resolution at the federal court, and was active in various bar association committees and functions. When it came time to staff our expanded lawyering skills program with practicing attorneys, he knew just whom to call on and for what position to call on them.

Bill's legacy will continue, for one does not shape and anchor an institution's attitude over as many years as Bill did without leaving that attitude as a constant source of strength for the institution's future. Besides, those of us who know Bill also know that he will not be far away, and that, when we need him to serve again, he will return.